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ABSTRACT

The authors address the conditions of mainstreaming visually handicapped students in regular schools in Quebec. Types of schools for the visually impaired in Quebec are briefly described. Reported are findings from a study which evaluated different aspects of the mainstreaming of visually impaired students, including the perceptions of the students and their teachers, the academic performance of the visually handicapped students, and their socioeconomic status. Noted among results based on interviews with 33 students, are that most students want to go to regular school, but several of them would like to see their relationships with their classmates improve, and for all activities the handicapped children are significantly less chosen than their classmates with normal vision. (SW)

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MAINSTREAMING THE VISUALLY HANDICAPPED CHILDREN IN QUEBEC

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ABSTRACT

This presentation deals with the conditions of mainstreaming visually handicapped students in regular schools in Quebec.

We will first briefly describe the main types of schools which are now open for the visually handicapped in our province. This will be followed by the screening of a video tape illustrating some of the conditions of the education of these students.

We will conclude this paper with a presentation of the results of a study in which we evaluated different aspects of the mainstreaming of visually handicapped students: the perceptions of the students and their teachers, the academic performance of the visually handicapped students, and their sociometric status.

Types of Schools for the Visually Handicapped in Quebec

The first steps towards educating visually handicapped students were taken in the last century, when special schools were founded for them. In 1861 the Grey Nuns founded the Nazareth School in Montreal. These sisters taught blind girls, aged 6 to 21 and boys, aged 6 to 12. Almost one hundred years later, the Clers of Saint Viateur founded the Institut Louis-Braille for boys aged 13 to 21.

At present, there are two special residential schools for visually handicapped students in the entire province of Quebec. Given the great distances involved, many students must live at the schools to take advantage of the necessary rehabilitation services. Most other visually handicapped students attend regular schools, either in special classes

for the visually handicapped or in regular classes. Most functionally sighted children attend regular classes, while most of those working with braille are still educated in special schools.

Some of our schools have developed special orientations for teaching the visually handicapped. The Saint-Enfant-Jesus School, located in Montreal, is a regular school which has opened its doors to visually handicapped students from several other the city to attend classes in this school.

In this school, especially in the lower elementary grades, there are a few special classes where visually handicapped students who cannot be mainstreamed into a regular class learn the basics. Then they are gradually mainstreamed into the regular classes where they continue to benefit from the appropriate services before they return to their neighborhood schools. After they have returned to their local school, these students are still seen by special education and itinerant teachers.

This type of regular school, offering a special program is very rare and can only be established in an urban area. In rural areas, the number of visually handicapped students does not warrant the development of such specialized services. There, itinerant teachers meet the special needs of the visually handicapped students. These education teachers travel from school to school meeting with the visually handicapped students and their teachers.

In view of the size of our province and the relatively small number of visually handicapped students in any one area, these traveling teachers must cover great distances. The services are always supplied in relation to the needs of the students, thus they vary greatly from one child to

another: variation in length and frequency of visits, and so on.

The film we are about to show was designed to make teachers more aware of the presence of a visually handicapped student in a regular class. The footage was taken in the Saint-Enfant-Jesus School and shows several visually handicapped students who have been mainstreamed in a regular class; these students are capable of reading regular print. Vidéo, 12 minutes. (Video title: Come and See, a production of University of Quebec in Montreal).

The study we are now presenting aimed to determine the conditions in which visually handicapped students in Quebec are educated. Therefore we evaluated the perceptions of the visually handicapped students and their teachers concerning mainstreaming. (A more complete presentation of the study is made in "La revue des Sciences de l'Education", Vol. 8, no. 1, 1982, L'intégration des élèves handicapés de la vue.)

There were 33 subjects (22 boys and 11 girls), attending 22 schools throughout the province of Quebec: Montréal, Quebec City, Rouyn, St-Hyacinthe, Lac Megantic, etc. These children were in elementary school (grade 4 and up) and secondary school (up to secondary III). Twenty-one of the subjects were considered legally blind and six of them used braille in written communication.

In this study we evaluate the perception of the visually handicapped children toward their mainstream, the perception of their teachers, their academic performance in French and Maths and their sociometric status. The perceptions of the students concerning their mainstreaming were evaluated, based on an objective questionnaire and an interview.

The first part of this questionnaire aimed to determine the perceptions of the subjects towards school in general. The results obtained indicate that the visually handicapped subjects seem as satisfied with the school as their sighted classmates: they like their courses and teachers just as much. The visually handicapped students, however, express greater satisfaction with the student services, and indicate that they feel that they are better understood when an academic problem arises.

In a second question, the interviewer asked the subjects which they would prefer if they were able to choose where they would go to school: regular school or a school specially adapted for the visually handicapped. Here it should be taken into account that 14 of the subjects had already attended a special school for the visually handicapped and five of them had been in special classes for visually handicapped. Twenty-eight of the subjects did not hesitate to choose regular school; three of them said that they were very satisfied with the regular school, but could not make a choice because they had never been in a special school; three others said that they would prefer to go to a special school for the visually handicapped. Yet, these three subjects had never attended a special school. To justify their choices all of the subjects gave psychosocial reasons: their desire to be considered normal; learning in a sighted world; preparation for work; and so on. The three subjects who chose a special school argued that they would prefer to be educated with students who have the same problems as they do. It should also be noted that none of the subjects gave academic reasons for preferring one school over another, for example they learned more or got better grades in one school or another. All of their reasons had to do with their social situation.

The interviewer also asked the students if their handicap created problems for them in class. Nineteen of the subjects mentioned problems seeing the board, six mentioned problems with books, and four of them brought up problems in relationships with their classmates again. They also mentioned problems related to the degree of light in the classroom and the use of stencils and films.

To sum up, the results obtained through the interview indicate that most of the subjects want to go to regular school, but several of them would like to see their relationships with their classmates improve. In class, the problems of the visually handicapped student are most often related to the use of the blackboard.

The perceptions of the teachers concerning the mainstreaming of the visually handicapped student were determined mainly through an interview. All of the data collected indicates that most of the subjects are considered to be successfully mainstreamed. The mainstreaming of 27 subjects was considered successful, while that of four of them was considered a success on one level, but a failure on another, that is the question of social acceptance. The mainstreaming of two children was considered a failure; yet, this failure was not attributed only to the visual handicap: the subjects also had emotional problems or other handicaps.

The academic performance of visually handicapped students in French and Mathematics is very clear: Test t indicates that there is no significant difference to $P < 0.01$ between the visually handicapped students and their sighted classmates.

We use sociometric test to measure the social status of visually handicapped students. We evaluate the sociometric status for academic activities: French and Math and for social activities.

For all activities the visually handicapped children are significantly less chosen than their classmates with normal vision. About 50% of the visually handicapped children obtain results below the lower limits (It was 80% for the emotionally disturbed).

All of the results collected in this research underscore the problems related to the social acceptance of the visually handicapped student by his sighted classmates. It seems that the major problems of mainstreaming are social ones.

However, the handicapped students remain aware of the problems related to their social acceptance in the class. Several of them verbalized this situation during the interview, saying things such as: "I would like to be more accepted by my classmates," "I would like the others to be nicer to me," and so on. These problems are confirmed by the sociograms. It is not easy to explain this situation, particularly since their academic performance, is equal to that of the other students.